**Empathy, Timeliness, and Virtuous Hearing**

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*Journal of Philosophical Research* Vol. 49, 2024

\* This paper is published along with Professor **Amy Coplan**’s commentary:

“Response to “Empathy, Timeliness, and Virtuous Hearing””

**Abstract**:This paper aims to demonstrate how the notion of timeliness enriches our understanding of empathy and its associated virtuous hearing as discussed in liberatory virtue epistemology. I begin by showing how timeliness is relevant to empathy. Next, I apply this insight to the idea of virtuous hearing, in which empathy plays a significant role. I thus broaden the liberatory-epistemological conception of virtuous hearing as a corrective to timing-related injustice. Finally, I connect virtuous hearing with the ancient Greek concept of *kairos*, clarifying the conditions under which virtuous hearers must be sensitive to another’s opportune timing to testify.

**Keywords**: empathy; *kairos*; testimonial timing; timing-related injustice; virtuous hearing

**1. Introduction**

Recent philosophical literature on empathy has developed along two broad lines. The first explores the nature of empathy in terms of our understanding of other minds. This line of research focuses on how we track the representational content of the minds of others, and how one’s mental state can become an “accurate representation of a target’s situated psychological state” (Coplan 2011: 7). This method of analysis has been pursued by philosophers of mind and emotion, such as Alvin Goldman (2006), Peter Goldie (2011), Amy Coplan (2011), and Karsten Stueber (2006). Such scholars are interested in the egocentric biases that prevent one from accurately replicating another’s mental states, with the aim of specifying the inner mechanisms necessary to rectify such tendencies and inaccuracies. Coplan (2011), for instance, shows how inner mechanisms such as mental flexibility and emotional regulation can help one track another’s mental state accurately, thereby contributing to affective matching between individuals. We have thus seen significant advances in understanding how we engage empathically with others’ *minds*.

The second strand of research conceives of empathy as our capacity to engage withothers’ *needs*, as well as their minds. In this broader conception, empathy is associated with ethico-epistemic care and virtuous practice in response to the needs of others, particularly their need to be heard and understood. This view is found in both ethics of care and feminist or liberatory virtue epistemology (for short, liberatory epistemology or liberatory approaches). In the ethics of care, Michael Slote has foregrounded empathy in listening to those in need of care, showing how empathy contributes to and informs a respectful and virtuous response to the needs of others, including those who are oppressed (Slote 2007; see also Noddings 2010; Hamington 2017; Hayakawa 2022). Similarly, in the field of liberatory epistemology, Lorraine Code (1995) has discussed the role of empathy in responsible knowing and listening to the testimony of those who are oppressed or differently situated. Miranda Fricker (2007) and others have further developed this standpoint, arguing that empathy is required for the virtuous hearing and just treatment of others’ testimonies (Medina 2012; Daukas 2019).

This paper is primarily concerned with the latter, broader conception of empathy, particularly in relation to the recent development of liberatory epistemology. In contrast with the above-mentioned literature, however, I shall explore the fundamental significance of *timeliness*, which I believe is immediately relevant to the second conception of empathy.1 Specifically, this paper demonstrates how the notion of timeliness can enrich our understanding of empathy and virtuous hearing as they are discussed in liberatory approaches.2

The discussion proceeds as follows. The next section explains how timeliness is relevant to empathy, but without introducing virtue-epistemological considerations of hearing at this point. The discussion then moves on to the relevance of timeliness to virtuous hearing. In Section 3, we shall see how virtuous hearing is typically characterized in liberatory approaches, and I shall note that empathy is often considered crucial to virtuous hearing as a corrective to testimonial injustice. Section 4 considers how timing-related injustice can be similar to testimonial injustice, and raises the possibility of what I shall term “quasi-testimonial injustice.” Section 5 considers how the relation of empathy to timeliness can broaden the liberatory-epistemological conception of virtuous hearing as a corrective to timing-related injustice. And Section 6 connects virtuous hearing with the ancient Greek concept of *kairos*, clarifying the conditions under which virtuous hearers must be sensitive to another’s opportune timing to testify.

**2. Empathy and Timeliness**

In this section, I show how timeliness is directly related to empathy. In so doing, I seek to provide a timing-related characterization of empathy that can be applied to Sections 4 and 5.

Over the past two decades, a great deal of scholarship has been devoted to the nature and role of empathy (e.g., Coplan and Goldie 2011; Maibom 2017; Matravers 2017). To date, however, timeliness has received scant attention, which warrants redress insofar as the second strand of empathy research is concerned. I shall call empathy as understood by this line of inquiry “responsible empathy,” because it is deeply embedded in responsible ethico-epistemic practices for addressing others’ needs to be heard and understood. My provisional hypothesis is that responsible empathy typically demands a component of timeliness.

Let us begin by specifying the dimension of timeliness that is relevant to responsible empathy. Far from being limited to empathic responses, timeliness has broad relevance to human actions. Consider, for instance, someone who wishes to quit her current job and pursue a new career. Timeliness here has nothing to do with empathy: the person can decide when to change jobs based solely on considerations about her long-term interests and well-being. As such, her primary concern is whether or not it is too early (or too late) to change jobs *for her own sake*. Such a prudent application of timeliness helps her achieve her own flourishing, and therefore has a *self-regarding* dimension*.*

By contrast, timeliness pertaining to responsible empathy has an *other-regarding* dimension. (For brevity, unless otherwise stated, the term “empathy” or “empathic response” henceforth refers to responsible empathy.) What matters is that our response is neither too early nor too late with respect to another person. The lack of an other-regarding form of timeliness may serve to compromise empathic response. Thus, a response to those in need that arrives too late may cause doubt as to whether the action is genuinely empathic. To take a simple case, a person might be seen as lacking empathy in the following scenario: a person’s partner is suddenly screaming in agony, but they choose to prioritize completing a work task, thus delaying their response to their partner’s cries. This poorly timed response demonstrates an empathy deficiency unless there is a good reason for the partner’s prioritization of their own task. Even if this person were to ask *later on* after their partner’s well-being and listen with concern to what she had to say, this response would be *too late* to qualify as (fully) empathic. This suggests that listening must be enacted at a very particular and correct time, rather than at any time at all, to evince due regard for the other and so qualify as properly empathic. In other words, responsible empathy demands a timely act of listening in an other-regarding way.

Furthermore, responsible empathizers can exhibit an other-regarding concern with respect to timeliness in more complex situations having to do with paternalistic intervention. Consider the following example offered by Slote, which I slightly revise, about a child frightened of visiting the dentist. Her parent, while expressing empathy, takes the child to the dentist because there is a long wait until the next available appointment, by which time the child’s dental health may have deteriorated. As Slote carefully states, it is precisely *because* the parent is empathic to their child’s fear that they feel *upset* by having to take the child to the dentist. Thus, an empathic parent may “show a sensitivity to their child(’s point of view),” which a cold, officious parent would seem to lack (Slote 2007: 58).3

Slote’s observation can also be revised to include the parent’s *sensitivity to timeliness*. I propose that empathy can here lead to *timely acts of listening* in our temporally unfolding lives. We can think of this as follows: the parent, if sufficiently empathic, may feel that it is *too soon* to take the child to the dental clinic at that very moment, acknowledging and honoring the child’s fear and allowing it to guide decision-making. Indeed, it is this untimeliness that explains why the parent is upset by the pressure to visit the dentist immediately. This empathy-derived agitation may lead the parent not to go immediately, and instead to take the time to reassure their child first. Specifically, the parent may *begin by* *listening* attentively to what exactly the child is afraid of. *Only after* this act of listening should they then bring the child to the dentist. In this respect, empathy demands sharing through listening in a timely manner. This is why we would be inclined to consider the parent as less than fully empathic if they take their child to the dentist *prematurely*, without first listening to and assuaging their child’s fears.

Of course, we can also imagine a more pressing situation in which the dental appointment is fast approaching, and the parent feels compelled to leave home immediately. In this case, however, an empathic parent could still listen *while*—rather than *after*—taking their child to the dentist, as listening to the child’s fears after the fact would still be too late. In this respect, the kind of needs-responsive empathy being explored here contains an aspect of timeliness, which leads the parent to fully appreciate their child’s emotional unreadiness and fear. It is accordingly crucial to show regard for the timing of another, even in complicated cases wherein empathic responders must act against another’s will.

To stress the significance of timeliness in empathy, note that timely acts of listening constitute empathic practices in a wider range of interpersonal relationships than indicated above. This type of timeliness is at work not only in the relationship between parents and children, or friends and partners, but also in relationships such as those between teacher and student, physician and patient, or even in workplace relations. Consider how someone may show empathy to a bullied student, a depressed patient, or a harassed employee, for instance. We may naturally suppose that (*ceteris paribus*) a fully empathic teacher, doctor, or colleague would listen to others in an *appositely timed* manner. Should a student express pressing concerns to her teacher, an empathic teacher would promptly listen. Alternatively, if the student requires more time to process her feelings, then an empathic teacher will wait, asking after her well-being and listening later once the student feels ready to talk. Here again, empathic practice must be sensitive to the timings of others, because untimeliness may undermine empathic responses.

**3. A Liberatory-Epistemological Characterization of Virtuous Hearing**

We saw above that timely acts of listening have a significant role in empathic engagement. I apply this insight to the idea of virtuous hearing discussed in liberatory virtue epistemology. Before proposing my account, however, the present section looks at how liberatory-epistemological approaches generally conceive of virtuous hearing and the role of empathy in it. This overview will be useful when, in later sections, I lay out how my own account adds to the contemporary scholarship.

Liberatory virtue epistemologists tend to focus on two ways of characterizing epistemic virtue and vice, with their points of emphasis differing slightly. First, an integral part of our epistemic life involves listening to testimony in order to “know other people responsibly and well” (Code 1995: 84); indeed, our epistemic practices are profoundly social and intertwined with others (Pohlhaus 2017: 16). Second, because interpersonal relationships may involve unjust power relations, epistemic virtue must help ensure that the testimony of others is heard in *just* and *respectful* ways (Fricker 2007; Medina 2012).4 Accordingly, liberatory approaches hold that the epistemic virtue in question is not straightforwardly cognitive but simultaneously *ethical* and *political*.

Fricker has greatly advanced this viewpoint, particularly with her groundbreaking work *Epistemic Injustice: Power and Ethics of Knowing* (2007), in which she examines how social power relations unjustly affect our epistemic practices, and defines a virtuous form of hearing in terms of the avoidance and amelioration of such *unjust* epistemic practice. This means that developing a liberatory vision of virtuous hearing requires an understanding of how the injustice done to the (would-be) speaker is comprised.

Fricker’s analysis of epistemic injustice in particular emphasizes “the ethical and political aspects of our epistemic conduct” (2007: 2). Epistemic injustice occurs when “someone is wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower” or “as a giver of knowledge” (2007: 20). Above all, she sees *testimonial injustice* as the most prevalent form of this type of injustice. Testimony for Fricker, as is standard in the literature, includes all instances of telling that convey knowledge, and testimonial injustice is defined in terms of a hearer’s *unjust credibility judgment* about a speaker’s testimony (2007: 60). Fricker argues that a speaker suffers testimonial injustice when a hearer denies them credibility owing to prejudicial stereotyping of the speaker. For instance, a woman’s testimony about her experience of sexual harassment is accorded much less credibility than it deserves because a male hearer might hold a negative stereotype of women as emotionally exaggerating their experiences. This constitutes testimonial injustice, because the hearer’s prejudicial stereotyping of the woman leads to his *unjust* credibility judgment of the speaker’s testimony. The speaker is wrongfully impeded from informing another of her plight, thereby hindering the process by which “knowledge can be imparted from speaker to hearer” (2007: 16). In this manner, the speaker is wronged in her capacity as a testimonial agent and suffers testimonial injustice.

It is against the unjust impact of such prejudice that Fricker introduces the concept of “virtuous” or “responsible hearing.” As she describes it, virtuous hearing manifests a “*virtue of testimonial justice*,” a disposition that counters the influence of prejudiced stereotypes on (potential) interlocutors. Fricker thus considers the virtue of testimonial justice as “*a corrective anti-prejudicial virtue*” (2007: 91; emphasis added). Virtuous hearing is therefore a way of hearing that is just and respectful toward speakers with respect to possible prejudices. Thus, the rectification of unjust epistemic practices is central to the liberatory conception of epistemic virtue. As such, for Fricker, the virtue under consideration is a “hybrid virtue” (2007: 174) or an epistemic-ethical virtue, as “it aims at both truth and justice” (2007: 124). For the sake of convenience, I shall call the virtue or vice in question “epistemic” or “testimonial,” rather than “epistemic-ethical,” following Fricker’s usage. But readers should keep in mind that these terms still inevitably involve an ethical component insofar as they concern justice or injustice.

Furthermore, some liberatory epistemologists note the importance of being *empathic* in virtuous hearing. Lorraine Code, for instance, contends that responsible or virtuous listening requires an empathic sensitivity to the testimony of others, particularly those differently situated (1995: 91). Similarly, Fricker describes how empathy functions in virtuous hearing: “the [virtuous] hearer’s perception of the speaker includes whatever emotional responses are associated with a particular empathic engagement” (2007: 80). A key benefit of empathy, Fricker suggests, is that it enables us to attend to concrete and particular details related to an interlocutor’s feelings and experiences that would otherwise go unnoticed. This reduces the force of the prejudicial stereotypes that distort perceptions of those who testify. Following Fricker, José Medina also states that virtuous listeners are “those who are exceptionally empathetic (or more empathetic than the rest of us)” (2012: 80–81). According to Medina, empathy reduces prejudice toward the words of others who are from different social situations and backgrounds. Virtuous hearers are therefore those who engage empathically with differently situated others and gain responsible knowledge about them.

While these scholars mention empathy only in relation to credibility judgment, I now explore its broader role in the reception of testimony. My strategy is to delve deeper into the relationship between empathy and timeliness to help reframe the idea ofvirtuous hearing in terms of sensitivity to timeliness. In my view, virtuous hearing must also demonstrate *timing-related justice* in so far as it is understood to counteract unjust influences of prejudicial stereotypes on the reception of testimony. I therefore introduce the term “testimonial timeliness” or “testimonial timing” to make explicit that timeliness is embedded within the testimonial act and its reception. By this I refer to the need to be timely both with respect to testifying—to issuing testimony oneself—and with respect to listening to the testimony of others.

My core proposal is that sensitivity to testimonial timeliness, as empathy exhibits, is vital to virtuous hearing. In order to be virtuous hearers, agents must listen to testimony in an other-regarding manner; this means paying due regard to the timeliness of this listening. Urging another to testify too soon might be oppressive if the other is not prepared to talk, and such pressure could unduly inhibit them from exercising testimonial capacity. And yet a delayed request for testimony may come too late to be helpful, and so silence or discourage them from demonstrating their “capacity as a giver of knowledge” (Fricker 2007: 5). The virtuous hearer *ought not* to assume that they can listen to the testimony of others at any time. This is worth considering, because the current literature neglects the *timing-related aspect* of testimonial virtue and vice. As a corrective to this oversight, I show that timeliness also deserves a prominent position.

**4. Testimonial Timing and Quasi-Testimonial Injustice**

Liberatory virtue epistemologists typically take a non-ideal approach (e.g., Fricker 2007; Medina 2012). That is, they begin by identifying the wrongs that arise in non-ideal, oppressive circumstances, and then explore how virtue and justice can correct unjust epistemic practices. In the same way, I first show that a hearer’s prejudices toward a speaker involve a timing-related injustice, before exploring, in the next section, how virtuous hearing should avoid or rectify this. We can therefore first consider how an ill-timed attempt to listen (or request testimony) can harm others and produce timing-related injustice, in order to better understand the injustice that the virtuous hearer should avoid.

The key idea is that testimonial vice (i.e., vice associated with testimonial reception) has a *temporal* component. Consider this example, in which *unjust timing* wrongs the other as a testimonial agent. Suppose a husband, Taro, listens to what his wife, Naomi, has to say, but only when he deems it appropriate. He listens only when he wants to spare the time, and so may not listen when she sincerely needs him to. He cares only about his work, and so prioritizes his own schedule. And suppose, further, that his attitude is a result of his patriarchal belief that wives are subordinate to their husbands, and thus that a husband’s schedule and timing are more important than a wife’s. This belief makes him irritated when his wife needs to tell him about her struggles, because it interrupts the smooth progress of his scheduled work. And he fails to attend to what would be an opportune moment for Naomi to talk. For instance, owing to his androcentric understanding of how to utilize time, Naomi is forced to wait until a long time afterward, despite her pressing need for Taro to know how exhausted she is by, for example, having to take care of her mother with dementia. When Naomi wants Taro to listen to her testimony, he responds coldly, not letting her speak until it fits his own timings: “Don’t you *know* how busy I am right now?” We can further suppose that when Taro finally makes time to listen to Naomi, she is fed up and no longer interested in talking. In this situation, Taro undermines the timing of Naomi’s testimony and so unjustly silences her.

Of course, it could be equally inopportune to attempt to listen *too early.* Suppose that Taro pressures Naomi to talk about her emotionally strenuous relationship with her ill mother just when Naomi is most overwhelmed and exhausted by caring for her mother, and so lacks the emotional wherewithal to talk. Suppose further that Taro does this in order to put this annoying matter to bed once and for all, so that he can return to his work as quickly as possible. Taro is impatient with Naomi’s reluctance to talk immediately, and thus imposes his own timings and future-oriented stance on her. This is despite the fact that people overwhelmed by suffering often require a long time until they feel ready to articulate their painful experiences (Biro 2011). Affliction (whether physical or psychological) can drain one’s energy and desire required to talk, which prevents the production of appropriate speech (Biro 2011; Conway 2007; Frank 2013; Scarry 1985; Styron 1992). Accordingly, if Taro prematurely urges Naomi to verbalize how her relationship with her mother affects her (so as to move past it quickly), he places undue pressure on her and oppresses her because Naomi is thereby pushed to testify despite her emotional unreadiness. In this situation, Naomi might rightly judge that the depth of her suffering, which defies prompt articulation, is not empathically understood. As such, Taro’s testimonial vice is ineluctably bound up with his refusal to make time for Naomi’s testimony. Oppressed testimonial agents such as Naomi are often given little, if any, time to prepare for articulating or testifying to their experiences.5 On the other hand, oppressive agents such as Taro are too quick to impel others to testify and too quick to finish listening.6 Taro urges Naomi to move forward, to rush ahead, without taking sufficient time to take her suffering on board. Consequently, he prevents Naomi from effectively exercising her testimonial capacity.

The effects of the timing-related injustice resemble those of testimonial injustices that Fricker thematizes. Naomi is wronged in her capacity as a testimonial agent by Taro’s ill-timed attempt to listen, which is affected by—and motivated by—his patriarchal prejudice. Taro’s (too) late attempt to listen may frustrate Naomi, discouraging her from exercising her capacity to discuss her suffering. Alternatively, his (too) early attempt to listen may catch Naomi in a situation where she is not prepared to testify, equally rendering her testimonial capacity ineffective and inoperative.

The point of the example is this:Taro assigns much less weight to Naomi’s (potential) testimonial act than it deserves because he disregards her own opportune testimonial timing, and this derives from his prejudiced belief that his (male) timing and schedule are more important than hers. We could call this *quasi-testimonial injustice* rather than testimonial injustice proper. In quasi-testimonial injustice, the unjust perception or judgment at issue is primarily about timeliness, although testimonial credibility is often not unrelated. Nevertheless, similarly to standard testimonial injustice, this is still attributable to the negative stereotyping of a speaker (Naomi) by a listener (Taro) that leads the listener to treat the speaker’s testimony unjustly. Taro’s patriarchal prejudice (that Naomi should behave in a subservient, dedicated manner) leads him to inflate the significance of his own timing or schedule while deflating that of Naomi, thus unduly overriding Naomi’s opportune testimonial timing. In other words, this prejudiced stereotype negatively impacts his perception or judgment of Naomi’s testimonial timeliness and its significance insofar as he pays little attention to Naomi’s opportune time to testify. And so, Naomi’s testimonial agency receives far less weight than it deserves, and she is unjustly prevented from talking to Taro about her struggles. This means that she is wronged in her capacity as a testifier or “capacity as a giver of knowledge” (Fricker 2007: 44) about her significant concerns.

Remember that the harm caused by testimonial injustice is not purely cognitive but, as Fricker puts it, something that “goes broad and deep” (2007: 51). This also applies to the timing-related injustice discussed here. Taro’s persistent neglect of Naomi’s timing damages her well-being and erodes her confidence that her own testimonial need is worthy of attention. She consequently suppresses her need to testify and tends to silence herself, thus becoming more excluded from the trustful and respectful communication that is vital to social life. This effect of timing-related injustice is thus similar to that of testimonial injustice proper because, as Fricker puts it, “testimonial injustice excludes the subject from *trustful conversation*” (2007: 53–54). It is natural to think that such an exclusion, if recurrent, could gradually undermine Naomi’s sense of self-respect.7

**5. Expanding the Notion of Virtuous Hearing**

The previous section broadened the notion of testimonial injustice to include a component of timeliness. It is now time to broaden the notion of virtuous hearing too. We can recall that Fricker originally introduced virtuous hearing as working against (or without) unjust prejudices—especially identity prejudices “with a negative valence held against people qua social type” (2007: 35)—that impinge on perceptions of the testifier. In her view, testimonial injustice arises when a negative identity prejudice causes a hearer to give *less credibility* to an interlocutor’s word than it deserves. We have just seen that prejudices also have a *temporal* relevance, causing a hearer to give *less* *weight* to a speaker’s testimonial timing and agency; this is what I call *quasi-testimonial injustice*. As in the cases of testimonial injustice presented by Fricker, the interlocutor in cases of quasi-testimonial injustice is similarly unjustly “downgraded and/or disadvantaged in respect of their status as an epistemic agent” (2017: 53) or as a testimonial agent.

Fricker acknowledges that the concept of epistemic injustice (which includes testimonial injustice) should be further developed to aid in the identification of underexplored areas of injustice in our epistemic lives (2017: 53). In the same vein, the concept of virtuous hearing should also be developed, because virtuous hearing is typically contrasted with the vice of testimonial injustice. My goal is to expand the role of virtuous hearing to make it work against (or without) quasi-testimonial injustice; the liberatory-epistemological conception of virtuous hearer can cover not only someone “who reliably succeeds in correcting for the influence of prejudice” in their “credibility judgment” (Fricker 2007: 5), but also someone who reliably succeeds in correcting for the influence of prejudice on their treatment of another’s testimonial timing.

The key notion again is empathy. Whereas Fricker discusses empathy only in relation to credibility judgments, I treat the role of empathy more broadly, by also showing how empathy can sensitize and attune a hearer to an interlocutor’s opportune timing to testify. Remember that Fricker’s notion of virtuous hearing must function in an “anti-prejudicial” manner (2007: 92), that is, in a manner that counteracts prejudicial stereotypes (either deliberately or automatically). The central question in our updated context is how empathy is anti-prejudicial specifically with regard to another’s testimonial timeliness, thereby enabling virtuous hearing. As discussed in Section 2, the empathy under discussion typically requires a timely act of listening. We can now consider in greater depth how empathy enables virtuous hearing as the manifestation of timing-related justice.

Let us revisit the parent–child case from Section 2. The child is fixated on their *present* fear of the dentist, while the parent is oriented toward the *future*, considering the child’s long-term well-being. There are, therefore, two different temporal perspectives that underlie the misalignment between the parent’s and the child’s subjective temporal orientations. It is here that we see how the perspective of the other, toward which empathy is directed, is necessarily temporal.8 We can therefore say that virtuous hearing, insofar as it involves empathic engagement, should also require due regard for the other’s *temporal* perspective, which requires a perspectival shift in cases of temporal misalignment. If the parent here is wholly empathic to the child’s perspective, they will put aside their future-oriented stance and defer taking their child to the dentist. They will do this because they have tuned into their child’s present orientation and empathized with her emotional unpreparedness. This *temporal attunement* via empathic engagement allows the parent to offer a timely response to their child’s pressing testimonial need. Empathy can thereby sensitize parents to testimonial timeliness in an other-regarding manner, and this temporally attuned practice of empathy facilitates, rather than impedes, their child’s capacity to express and testify what she is currently feeling.9

Let us restate the above case by way of the *anti-prejudicial* or *unprejudiced* aspect that Fricker considers integral to virtuous hearing. My view is that the virtuous hearing, which centers on empathy, must be sensitive to another’s testimonial timing in an *anti-prejudicial* (or *unprejudiced*) manner. In general, empathy can give us a closer and finer understanding of the perspectives of others, which lessens the inclination to impose a prejudiced stereotype on others.10 Thus, a parent capable of empathizing with their child’s perspective is more likely to reduce the impact of unwarranted stereotypes about children (consciously or automatically). For example, they can diminish the view that children are immature and less than full human beings and hence that their perspectives are less worthy of respect.

This anti-prejudicial function of empathy is conducive to the parent’s just and respectful treatment of their child’s *temporal* perspective and orientation. By sufficiently empathizing with their child’s perspective, the parent staves off negative stereotypes, and so instead of privileging their own future-oriented perspective, they give due regard to the child’s present-oriented perspective and here-and-now need to testify. This makes the parent more likely to listen to their child’s testimony promptly without delay. Thus, the anti-prejudicial function of empathy helps the parent treat the child’s testimonial timing justly and respectfully. Of course, empathy comes in varying degrees, so it could be less effective in other cases. But this does not mean that empathy is unhelpful, only that it does not always work in the same way. From this perspective, we can say that virtuous hearing, which involves empathy, can incorporate (albeit to varying degrees) an anti-prejudicial form of sensitivity to another’s testimonial timing, thereby manifesting timing-related justice in the reception of testimony.

The inverse scenario may reinforce this point. If the parent lacked empathy for their child, then they would be more likely to hold negative prejudices (including the idea that children’s perspectives are less worthy of respect) and so be less attentive to their child’s present-oriented perspective. They would therefore be more likely to make their child conform to their own future-oriented perspective, and so their child would feel less safe expressing her worries and less able to exercise her capacity to testify. Here, hearing is not virtuous unless it involves an anti-prejudicial form of temporal attunement via empathy, which helps us respond in a timely and fair manner to others’ testimonial needs.

We can analyze the Taro–Naomi case in the same way. Taro, we saw, holds the patriarchal prejudice that wives are subordinate to their husbands, and therefore that a husband’s timing takes precedence over a wife’s. Because of this, Taro lacks empathy for Naomi and privileges his own temporal perspective, thereby imposing his work-centered timing and future-oriented temporality on Naomi despite the fact that she is deeply caught up in the *present* experience ofsuffering. This temporal misalignment makes it difficult for Naomi to testify, with the result that Taro’s conduct falls far short of virtuous hearing. We can thus again see how virtuous hearing relies heavily on an anti-prejudicial form of temporal attunement by way of empathy.

This section has explained how empathy sensitizes the hearer to *when to listen* to testimony (or when to request testimony) in an anti-prejudicial way, which counteracts unwarranted stereotypes about the speaker. We have thus elucidated the timing-related nature of virtuous hearing, which is underexplored in the current literature.

**6. Virtuous Hearing and *Kairos***

In this section, I explore the temporal aspect of virtuous hearing in a little more depth by seeking to connect the idea of virtuous hearing with the ancient Greek notion of *kairos*. Although fully investigating this connection requires more in-depth study, we can nonetheless briefly note its significance. I argue that the notion of *kairos* helps us understand the conditions under which the virtuous hearer becomes more sensitive to testimonial timeliness. My suggestion is that testimonial timeliness becomes especially necessary during times of crisis or tension.

Our discussion of testimonial timeliness is already connected to the notion of *kairos*, which I render as apt timing in response to a *crisis*, even though *kairos* is a multifaceted concept and not necessarily limited to the temporal (Sipiora 2002). And yet, the broader perspective refers to the timely act performed in response to a crisis (Smith 1969), a usage which I also employ. According to John Smith,

Three distinct, but related, concepts are involved in the notion of *kairos*. It means, first, the right time for something to happen in contrast with “any” time; this sense of *kairos* is captured by the English word, “timing” […] Second, *kairos* means a time of tension or conflict, a time of “crisis” implying that the course of events poses a problem which calls for a decision at that time. Third, *kairos* means a time when an opportunity for accomplishing some purpose has opened up as a result of the problem that led to the crisis. Thus *kairos* means *the time* *when* something should happen or be done, the “right” or “best” time […] Before this critical time is “too soon” for the event, and after this critical time is “too late.” (Smith 1969: 6)

The action in question should be well-timed, neither too early nor too late, especially in “a time of crisis” (Smith 1969: 6). It is clear, then, that this idea appeals precisely to the testimonial timeliness involved in virtuous hearing that we have been exploring above.

Furthermore, *kairos* is often linked with virtue in ancient Greek texts, although this link has been largely overlooked in the contemporary literature on virtue. In particular, the ancient Greek rhetorician Isocrates emphasized the role of *kairos* in constituting *phronesis*—practical wisdom—which is a central virtue in his theory of pragmatic ethics (Sipiora 2002; Isocrates 1929; Kinneavy 2002). For Aristotle, too, *phronesis* implicitly includes a component of *kairos* (Sipiora 2002; Tsang 2008; see also Aristotle 2002: 1115b17, 1120a25–30). So, in this tradition, there is a deep connection between virtue and *kairos*. It is therefore by no means unnatural to extend the notion of *kairos* to our discussion of virtuous hearing.

The notion of *kairos* articulates the idea of virtuous hearing in both the Taro–Naomi and the parent–child examples because both Naomi and the child express their testimonial needs “in a time of tension or conflict, a time of ‘crisis’” (Smith 1969: 9). Importantly, testimonial timeliness does not always have the same significance, and it is particularly during these times of crisis that a timely act of listening acquires greater significance. As a particularly clear case, consider citizens’ testimonies about atrocities committed by enemy forces against civilians (an example from current affairs might be that of Ukrainian citizens’ testimonies). A timely act of listening carries greater weight during such a crisis than in so-called “normal” times. If a civilian were overwhelmed by the brutality of the enemy and thus emotionally unprepared to give testimony, hearers might be more strongly prohibited from prematurely urging them to testify. And conversely, if a civilian wished to testify immediately, hearers might be more strongly required to provide them with an immediate hearing. This indicates that, during a crisis, it is most important to listen to or request testimony in good time, neither too early nor too late.

This is relevant to the anti-prejudicial function that is essential to virtuous hearing. A (would-be) testifier’s crisis more strongly demands timing-related justice as quasi-testimonial justice, and thus more strongly requires the hearer to respect testimonial timeliness without holding prejudicial stereotypes. So, in the case of Taro and Naomi, Taro’s disregard for Naomi’s testimonial timing is worsened by the fact that it takes place during Naomi’s time of crisis. Or consider Tom Robinson’s case in *To Kill a Mockingbird,* as taken up by Fricker (2007: 23–29), where entrenched racial discrimination prevents a white prosecutor and jurors from attending to evidence confirming that Robinson did nothing violent to the white girl. Moreover, the prosecutor makes Robinson testify too hastily, and finishes listening to him too soon. Again, it is particularly during a time of crisis (i.e., during his trial, which will have a profound effect on his future) that Robinson is forced to testify too hastily and that racial prejudices desensitize the prosecutor to Robinson’s testimonial timing and prevent him from waiting until Robinson feels psychologically safe to express himself. Here as well, then, the effects of timing-related injustice as quasi-testimonial injustice are more severe than they would otherwise be, because they occur during a crisis. In another situation, unjust disregard for testimonial timeliness would be less serious. An anti-prejudicial form of sensitivity to a (would-be) speaker’s testimonial timeliness therefore becomes increasingly necessary during their times of crisis.

Finally, we can now combine this idea of a testimonial type of *kairos* with the idea of *temporal attunement* developed in the previous section. In light of the above, it appears that in situations of crisis, temporally attuned empathy gains more meaning because it enhances sensitivity to testimonial timeliness in an anti-prejudiced manner. I have argued that virtuous hearing, which involves empathic engagement, requires one to respect the other’s *temporal* perspective, thus enabling a perspectival shift in tune with the other’s temporal orientation. Virtuous hearers should not impose a future-oriented stance on those overwhelmed by a *present* crisis, such as those who are trapped in present pain, stress, or fear. My proposal is that virtuous hearing must involve “kairotic receptivity,” which I characterize as follows:11

*kairotic receptivity*: in this receptive mode, we are not attempting to transform another’s temporal perspective but allowing our temporal orientation to become attuned to another’s, especially *in their times of crisis*. This other-regarding shift attests to our respect for their temporal perspective as worthy of attention and response. This creates a shared sense of time between self and the other, thereby facilitating a safe, trusting relationship in which the other can disclose and testify about their significant concerns *according to their own optimal timing*.

To count as virtuous hearing, temporal attunement, which the anti-prejudicial function of empathy promotes, must work well in a time of crisis. Kairotic receptivity helps satisfy this condition, because it attunes us to the temporal stagnation (i.e., the emotional unpreparedness to move forward) undergone by those in need or in pain. This then generates a shared temporal orientation, allowing for timely listening to the other’s concerns, fears, and pain that prevent them from moving forward. In this way, a virtuous hearer will pay due respect to another’s opportune testimonial timing in times of crisis, thereby making them feel that their needs are worthy of attention.

**7. Concluding Remarks**

Until now, virtue epistemologists have not given timeliness sufficient attention. By way of redress, I have considered the neglected relationship between empathy and timeliness and have explored how an empathic sensitivity to testimonial timeliness figures prominently in virtuous hearing. This has enabled a timing-sensitive account of testimonial virtue and vice, which gives due importance to listening in a timely manner, especially in crisis situations.

The analysis provided here is, of course, preliminary, but it is promising and worthy of further development. Application to a large-scale social context would also enable us to understand unjust timing in terms of *structural* injustice.12 By way of example, let us return to the Taro–Naomi case, and let us suppose that Taro is a Japanese man, as the name indicates (“Taro” is a popular name for Japanese males). Because Japan tends toward being a more sexist society,13 it would be logical to consider how deeply Taro’s timing-related vice is bound up with the broadly sexist social order in Japan. As Medina has stressed, individual vices are socially and culturally mediated (2012: 86–89). It is thus possible that androcentric social arrangements, which privilege men’s timings, might facilitate Taro’s insensitivity to Naomi’s testimonial timing and opportunities, fostering Taro’s wrongful prioritization of his own timing at the cost of hers. In this way, the approach outlined here might inspire further inquiry that could advance current debates on epistemic virtue and vice.14

**Notes**

1. The idea of timeliness may not bear directly on the first strand of empathy research, which conceives of empathy as a capacity to grasp the content of other minds. Thus, it is safe to assume that the connection between empathy and timeliness is something less than necessary.

2. On the importance of timeliness in the Chinese philosophical tradition, see Lai (2012); Hetherington and Lai (2015); and Hetherington (2022). However, their discussions do not focus on the other-regarding form of timeliness with which I am primarily concerned here.

3. Slote highlights several interesting features involved in empathy (such as spatial and causal immediacy), and also notes a present-centered aspect of empathy by considering the manifestation of temporal immediacy in its operation (Slote 2007: 25–26). In my view, this aspect should be further characterized in terms of temporal attunement and timeliness.

4. Code also explores what it means to be a responsible (or virtuous) knower. For Code, responsible knowing, which she thinks is centered on listening, requires us to be alert to the danger of suppressing or silencing the voices of others, especially those in precarious positions (1995: 78–82). Heidi Grasswick makes a similar point, namely that given liberatory virtue epistemologists’ “broader goal of social justice,” “analyses of epistemic contexts characterized by oppression are especially important” (2017: 218). Rectification of epistemic oppression, particularly epistemic injustice, is thus central to the liberatory conception of epistemic virtue. Such an approach, also called “feminist responsibilism,” differs from classical, standard responsibilism in stressing the importance of responsibility in correcting the impact of oppressive social power on our epistemic conduct (2017: 217–226).

5. Here we need only recall Tom Robinson’s case in *To Kill a Mockingbird* as taken up by Fricker (2007: 23–29).

6. Recall Tom Robinson’s all-white jury and prosecutor. I shall briefly take this up in Section 6.

7. Note that there is an intrinsic connection between the ideas of justice and self-respect. John Rawls, for instance, states that justice requires “social bases of self-respect” (2005: 181). This also suggests an intimate relationship between injustice and the deprivation of self-respect.

8. Matthew Ratcliffe describes the importance of being sensitive to different temporal experiences in a therapeutic context. According to Ratcliffe, “this kind of temporal sensitivity enhances clinicians’ ability to empathize with their patients” (2012: 134). However, he mentions this only in passing and does not explore it beyond the therapeutic context. Consequently, his account leaves it unclear whether such sensitivity is a constitutive part of empathy in the broader context that I have focused on.

9. Thomas Fuchs argues for the importance of temporal alignment in establishing and maintaining a healthy mental life (2020: 18–21). Relatedly, Daniel Stern argues that “the longer the therapist can stay with the present moment and explore it, the more different paths to pursue will open up. […] there is great clinical value in a more lingering interest in the present moment” (2004: 139). Unlike the account developed here, however, Fuchs and Stern do not describe empathy or epistemic virtue. Accordingly, it remains to be seen how vital these temporal aspects are to empathy and virtuous hearing. I therefore fully incorporate the notions of timeliness and temporal attunement into my analysis of empathy and virtuous hearing.

10. The view that empathy provides us with a closer and finer understanding of another’s perspective is widely received among many empathy theorists (Coplan and Goldie 2011; Hoffman 2000; Maibom 2017; Matravers 2017).

11. Consider Nel Noddings’ and Michael Slote’s insightful characterization of receptivity (see also Hayakawa 2016). Both Noddings and Slote capture a core feature of receptivity as relinquishing or reducing unilateral control over others. According to Noddings’ characterization, in a receptive mode we surrender control, and “our manipulative efforts are at rest” (1984: 30). That is, “[w]e are not attempting to transform the world, but we are allowing ourselves to be transformed” (1984: 34). Slote also emphasizes that a receptive attitude involves actively avoiding any attempt to directly control situations or other individuals (2013: 169–193). Rejecting the impulse to control is central to his characterization of receptivity as well. This understanding of receptivity can be extended to our discussion of *kairos* associated with testimonial reception.

12. I am indebted to Elizabeth Anderson (2012) for the idea of structural amelioration, although she does not discuss its timing-related aspect. See also Hayakawa (2022: 131–135).

13. According to the Global Gender Gap Report (2023), Japan ranks 125th out of 146 countries in the Gender Gap Index.

14. Special thanks to Heather Battaly, Amy Coplan, and Michael Slote for their encouragement and insightful comments. Thanks also to Hirohiko Abe, Kaoruko Aita, Jason Baehr, Maurice Hamington, Katsunori Miyahara, Rika Sasaki, Kunimasa Sato, and Sayaka Satoh for their helpful feedback.

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